

TO MEET HIS EXCELLENCY

Drawings by J. N. Marchand

By JOHN LE BRETON

MANY months ago there had been an order that the bridge at Amrakutch should be doubled in width. MacManus, who had the job in hand, took a vow that it would be completed by the time the Governor passed back along the line on return from his tour. Now the thing was done, and the Governor was due at two o'clock the next day. He had graciously consented to stop and inspect the work, and a little wooden station had been erected for his convenience, and made gaudy with red cloth and a multitude of flags.

Then the monsoon broke—seven full days ahead of time. Suddenly and unexpectedly the clouds opened and let fall a solid sheet of water, which in a few hours turned the parched earth into a muddy swamp, and the river into a yellow, raging flood. Still, this was only the forerunner of the real break, and the weather might conceivably clear up for a few hours now and again. Then there would be fresh flags to replace the drenched and sodden ones, and perhaps flowers, and all would be well again.

The rainfall was perceptibly lighter toward evening when MacManus came out of his stuffy little office and walked over the bridge,—a tall, lean man, with his hands in his pockets, and his head bent to let the water run comfortably off the brim of his hat. His chief assistant, Chunder Sen, followed,—a short and bulky figure in an ample mackintosh, sheltered under a good umbrella. He did not mind venturing into the rain in the least, no more than MacManus did.

* Except that it was bare of paint, the bridge was finished, and MacManus could find no fault with it. He tapped the sounding iron here and there with his stick, through sheer habit, passed over, and walked back again, smiling a little, as if his bridge was the only solid fact in the universe, and as if there were no such things as fevers and agues flying about to seize upon the foolhardy.

"Do you remember, Chunder Sen," he said, stopping short, "that you bet me three months' salary we'd not be finished in time?"

Chunder Sen's glance came up with a jerk from his Wellington galoshes,—the very newest thing from Bombay, and quite smart in appearance, besides being a perfect guard against wet feet. Some of the childlike satisfaction vanished from his round, good-humored face, though he still smiled.

"You are so clever, and so excessively energetic, Mr. MacManus," he said conciliatingly, "at the time when I spoke it was beyond all contemplation. You, having obtained the miraculous, it obliterates the commonplaces of bet."

MacManus walked on. "A bet is a bet," he observed. He had not the slightest intention of enforcing the payment of this particular one. On the contrary, he meant to make his hard-working assistant glad with a gift, and to praise him judiciously when the opportunity arose. He was not really considering either the bet or Chunder Sen seriously, his mind being fairly well occupied with himself and his own achievement. He did not notice the long silence that elapsed before the other man spoke again.

"It was the not knowing that made me the inducement, Mr. MacManus. You have the advantage when you have performed what you say."

How devoutly Chunder Sen had hoped that the bet had been forgotten, and would never be referred to again, no one but himself knew. He had known MacManus for only two weeks when he had offered it, and had honestly believed that no human being could have forced such a task through to completion in the specified time. From his curious point of view, it seemed that MacManus had taken advantage of his ignorance. It was his persistence that nettled MacManus and led him to pursue the argument.

"Come now, if I had lost, you'd have expected me to pay. It was touch and go, many a time. I often ex-



Then one squatted down and faced his victim. "Dost thou know me, Chunder Sen?"

pected to have to fork out, especially when we dropped that three-ton box girder into the river. You get two hundred rupees a month—that's six hundred for me—unless you mean that you won't pay."

Chunder Sen fairly writhed inside his mackintosh. Apart from the loss of the money, there was that in his chief's tone that made him feel extraordinarily uncomfortable.

"Oh, Mr. MacManus," he cried, "it shall be the family honor! I shall pay even if they are all upsold—for surely it will repay somehow!"

It was the suggestion in the final words that did all the mischief. MacManus's temper was at boiling point instantly. He turned round and glared into Chunder Sen's unhappy face. "Look here, Mr. Chunder Sen," he said with icy severity, "if you mean to pay, pay, and have done with it! But don't count upon its doing you any further service here or hereafter!"

And he marched off without another word. Chunder Sen stood in the rain looking after him, silent and furious. There was nothing wrong with MacManus, except that he happened to be an Irishman—heart, brain, code of honor, and all. And there was nothing wrong with Chunder Sen, who was as kindly, unselfish, and amiable a fellow as ever lived, except that he was a Bengali, and in consequence viewed the world and life as a Bengali must.

WHEN MacManus was out of sight Chunder Sen began to walk on. He went down the line, past the railway huts, and on into the dismal gray of the falling rain. There was no object in this most uninviting promenade; but he was too miserable to go as usual to his quarters and his frugal meal. Chunder Sen was a hero in his everyday life—only he did not know it. To him it appeared the most natural thing that out of his meager salary he should maintain his father and mother, his mother's mother, his widowed sister and her three young children, besides sending five rupees every month

to a female Eurasian relative who miraculously existed on the border land of starvation somewhere near Calcutta. When he had done cursing himself for his folly in having made the thrice accursed bet, there remained tragedy—no less. He was to pay away his salary for three months, and these helpless ones, to whom he was the giver of all, must starve. Never once did he think of mentioning them to MacManus, and putting forward their plea for the right to live. He had experienced one taste of the white man's scorn for the possible evader of a debt of honor. It was enough, and more than enough.

A little farther down the line, and his most ardent wish was that MacManus would die, and thus, being released from all earthly concerns, cease to trouble about the payment of bets. Why not? All day the man had tramped about, from dawn till dusk, wet to the skin, and was now probably sitting down to eat in his steaming clothes. Cholera or fever might pluck him out of the midst of his hundred things to do and put him neatly into his grave within a few hours. He might fall off the bridge, be drowned in the flood. The mental picture was so satisfactory that Chunder Sen drew a deep breath of relief, and then, unconsciously advancing one step farther, saw himself pacing mournfully in the rear of the funeral procession. It is a fact that his eyes were moist with regret for MacManus's untimely demise.

HE had rounded the first curve, and was a full mile away from the bridge, splashing hopelessly along, an odd, dumpling-like figure in his complete wet-weather gear. Suddenly he almost fell over two half naked coolies who were unaccountably busy on the line itself. As they sprang up, he glimpsed a hole between the metals. It was treason—murder—the laying of a mine! With a hoarse scream he turned to run; but instantly they

were upon him, and a cord was being tightened about his throat. The umbrella was flying down the line before a storm gust, his hat fell off, and as his agonized face was bared he heard his name uttered, and the noose was dragged loose.

Between them, the men led him staggering to the side of the line and seated him upon a pile of timber. He gasped and panted, coughed and spat, until at last he could breathe freely. The coolies stood by, the rain streaming off their glistening skins. Then one squatted down and turned his face up to the victim. He demanded:

"Dost thou know me, Chunder Sen?"

Chunder Sen's aching eyeballs rolled in that direction. "Ram Chundra?" he hesitated.

"Yea, Ram Chundra, and Lal Buksh also. We were as brothers once. Was it not so?"

Chunder Sen had been at college with them both, and here they were, half naked, and unkempt as illiterate coolies. Why? Even Chunder Sen's dazed mind supplied the answer readily. For the sake of that little hole upon the line, the line over which his Excellency the Governor would pass the next day.

"We are as naught beside thee, O well placed one," said Ram Chundra, making eyes of admiration. "The prize of competition was to thee. We failed. Brother, we be two poor men seeking work."

Chunder Sen said effusively, "Good—very good!" It was not a felicitous way of expressing his belief in the story; but he had not recovered his self-control. Also he was acutely aware that he was quite alone with them, and that it was quickly growing dark. The men glanced at each other. In those three words he had told them that he had seen the excavation between the rails.

"We made this hole," said Ram Chundra, waving his hand toward it, "having this intention. Within the hour we should have gone to MacManus Sahib crying that we had found those at work upon it who fled at our approach. Wherefore, in the thankfulness of his heart,

he should give us employment. There is yet work upon the bridge, and we be painters."

Lal Buksh took up the scheme smoothly. "Yet, seeing that we have met with thee, and that MacManus Sahib is thy friend, we will fill in the hole now. Thou wilt say to him, 'Friend, here be two who failed where I made success my own—give them work for thy friend's sake.' Surely, he will hasten to give thee pleasure."

THEN Chunder Sen remembered everything. His anger and despair rode him with spurs on the way to madness. In the name of all his gods, he wished that he had never stumbled upon this conspiracy! His own little world—compact of the trust of the helpless, his own pity and generosity, and their mutual affection—was crumbling into ruin. What did he care if the Governor and every European in Amrakutch were blown sky high—so long as only MacManus went with them?

How much of all this he had said, or left unsaid, he did not know when he came to himself again. But he did know that he had voiced his suspicions of these two men overplainly, and that there could be no more feigning ignorance as to the meaning of their presence on the line. His rage burned itself out suddenly, and in the cold ashes of it was a dreadful fear. He sprang up; but Ram Chundra's compelling touch was on his shoulder, and he sank under it abjectly.

"Now the matter is easy," said Ram Chundra comfortably. "It is true that we came to do this thing, as thou sayest; but it shall be a greater thing than we had conceived. Let the mine, then, be laid not here, but beneath the station, where all the Sahibs shall be gathered together. We be thy coolies, O Chunder Sen. See that we have time, and that none overlook our labor."

Clearly there was no choice. There was a flood of horror, of bloodshed, to plunge into; but on the other side was life, free of MacManus and the forever infamous bet. The alternative he read in the eyes of the so-called coolies. These men had come with their lives in their hands. He put his cold fingers to his bruised throat shudderingly. But for the merest chance, he would have been a swollen-faced corpse lying beside the line by now—or across it, so that the first train might account for his violent end. Yes, the fierce question in those intent eyes had to be answered. His darkened, puffy lips formed his first words to them again:

"Good—very good!"

No more was needed. Ram Chundra took command.

"Go thou before us down the line, and we will follow, under thy protection. We have dynamite in the bushes here, and we will bring it to a safe place near the station. Come, Brother!"

THERE were several stunted bushes within a few yards, and as he approached them a man rose from their shelter and sped silently and with such swiftness that the darkness swallowed him up almost at once, and made pursuit impossible. They just saw that he was naked, save for a loincloth; and Lal Buksh thought he had seen a long, white beard; but he could not be quite sure. At first Chunder Sen shook like a leaf, and his teeth chattered with insane fright; but the other men laughed at him until he braced himself up to a show of calmness. It was but a coolie, they said, an old coolie who could not have understood the English they had been speaking, even had he been close enough to overhear. Also, if he was a spy, he would give notice that at this part of the line there might be danger, and the police would look, and find a hole, and no more. Let them look!

Chunder Sen nodded, and hurried away back toward the station. His comfort was that in the half-light the hidden man could not have recognized him or have seen his companions clearly. He found the night watchman at the station, and told him that the two new coolies waiting beyond had been taken on to work there. Then he left them, and walked leisurely in the direction of his own quarters.

He had to pass the chief's rough bungalow. It was lighted up, and through the open doorway MacManus could be seen at dinner, his servant standing behind his chair. As Chunder Sen looked on them from

the symbolic blackness without, a voice close beside him set every nerve in his overwrought body jarring tumultuously. Then the panic subsided into a deadly quiet as an old man came out into the light shed by MacManus's lamps, and salaamed—for it was a lean old man, garbed as a coolie, and having a long, white beard. Without doubt it was the man who had been hidden in the bushes. But he did not seem to recognize Chunder Sen.

"I would speak with MacManus Sahib," he said breathlessly; "but they who serve him drive me away. If thou art his servant—"

A sting of anger forced Chunder Sen into speech. "I am the Chief Specification Sahib," he said curtly.

The old man was speaking in English, with a purer accent than that of Chunder Sen himself. He was no coolie. "Then lead me unto him. He will give thanks to thee also when he hath heard that which I have come far to tell. Look thou—when the Sahib's father was padre in Kanara I was clerk in the telegraphs—even I! I have borne MacManus Baba in these arms—and now he is a great man. Say unto him, I beseech thee, that Govind Vinayak waits, and would speak with him—for his life's sake!"

Chunder Sen could scarcely control the tremblings that seized upon him again now more strongly than ever. He was cold all over in spite of the steamy heat. The whisper came hissing from between his unsteady lips. "What is it, what is it? Tell me. I—I am the friend of MacManus Sahib. Whence comest thou?"

The old man had not recognized Chunder Sen—that was only too true. He gave up his story simply as a child. "From Amedhar. And to us there came one many months ago, speaking of killing the Sahibs so that such as he should be Sahibs in their place. All this we passed with negligence until he left us, saying that Boynton Sahib should be killed—and he was killed. Also that Grant Sahib be killed—and he was killed. Then he returned to us, boasting greatly, and said that the Burra Sahib would come to this place upon a day that is tomorrow, and that he would be killed. Thereupon I made report to the police inspector—who returned reply that it was not his dis-

trict, it being seven long days' marches from here. I laid information with the District Judge Sahib—and he reproached me, saying that it was such as I who, talking of treason, made treason. Then I learned that the one whom the Burra Sahib journeyed hither to do honor unto was my MacManus Sahib—my *chota* Sahib, that is a great man since. Therefore I have come afoot as a poor man to warn him, lest his day of joy be turned into bitterness by these doers of evil."

There was no response at all. Chunder Sen stood and stared, his mind a sheer blank of terror. The old man stooped and whispered:

"Behold, I came by the new line, and there I saw two men making a pit. I hid in the bushes, and thereunder were sticks of dynamite. And again came another to the two, and it was said between them that the mine should be laid not between the rails, but under the station. And one of the men was he who came to my village saying that the Burra Sahib should be killed here, on the day that is tomorrow. Now take me unto my Sahib!"

MACMANUS had just finished dinner when Chunder Sen came in, rolling his eyes, and working his hands nervously in the air. He jumped up and pushed his chair back, with a brusque demand for information.

"What's wrong? What the—"

"Oh, Mr. MacManus," spluttered Chunder Sen, sawing at the air, "there is the very old Dickens wrong! You will be hardly creditable when you hear. No more less than design to wreck his Excellency's train tomorrow! Individually I ascertained the culprit, an old man, but one of strength. A mile up line he was digging away sleepers, and I, irrespective of personal welfare, maintained the capture."

"Where is he?" asked MacManus sharply.

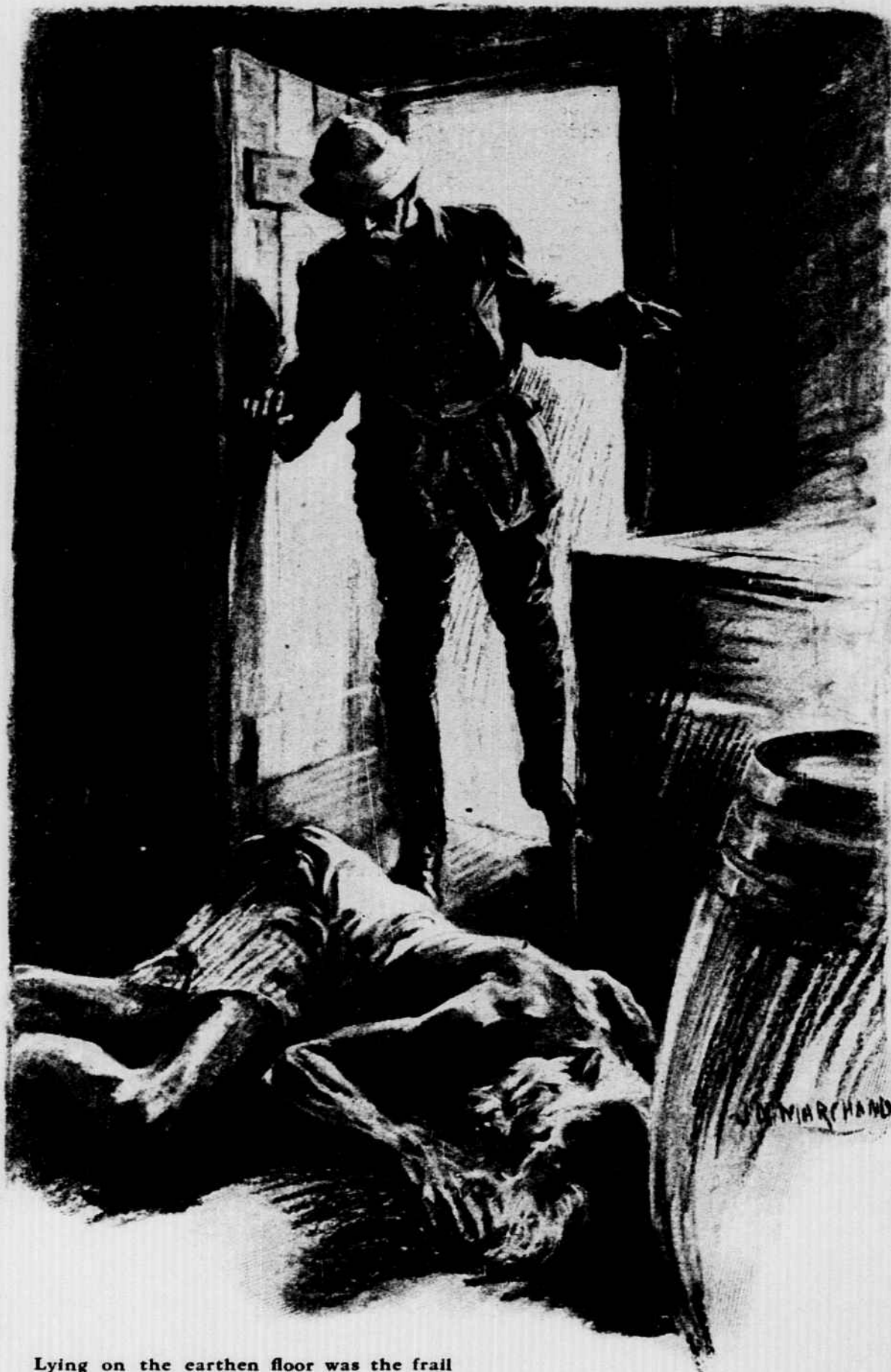
"Under certain pretenses I decoyed him until several coolies were obtainable, and then, in spite of mighty strugglings, we incarcerated him in one of the huts—the key being herewith." Chunder Sen showed it lying in the palm of his hand. "And if I might venture advice, Mr. MacManus, I would say avoid unrestful rumors by keeping him locked up until after advent of Governor tomorrow. Then, if I am wrong, I accept all blameworthiness."

It was not the first time that MacManus had taken the law into his own hands, and in an instant he decided that Chunder Sen was right. The whole thing might turn out to be a foolish scare; but if he informed the authorities it would certainly cause a worthy but highly nervous gentleman to deviate from plans that were most important to all Amrakutch that he should carry out. And even if mischief had been intended they had secured one man, and now had warning that would keep them on the alert. So he sat down again and selected a cigar; for he had had a long day of it, and was tired.

"Very well," he said, "I'll see into it later. Tell the police to be on the lookout, and have the line patrolled all night. Examine all the approaches yourself at daybreak. We'll leave nothing to chance—though personally I should say it is some old fool playing at plots in order to bring his private grievances to light. Time enough to send him to be examined by the magistrate after the Governor has gone."

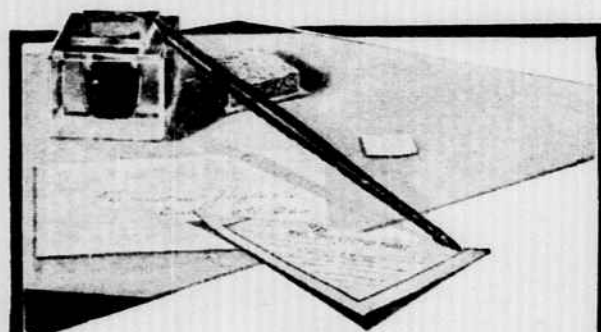
Knowing the thoroughness with which Chunder Sen invariably carried out all work intrusted to him, MacManus made no personal survey of the line next morning, nor of the station. It was enough that he found the line being patrolled according to orders, when he came upon the scene, and that Chunder Sen was superintending everything even more busily and fussily than usual. So, MacManus, who was going to entertain his Excellency and sundry guests at tiffin in the big marquee attached to the temporary station, devoted himself to preparations for an exceptionally gorgeous hospitality.

RAM CHUNDRA and his comrade sat peacefully in a disused toolhut about one hundred yards up the line, guarding a storage battery. They had laid insulated wires underground very skilfully and expeditiously during the night, and were in a position to explode with



Lying on the earthen floor was the frail husk of him, cast off by much suffering.

Continued on page 16



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them I wasn't suited for that business, and thought we had better play quits. A day or so afterward I received a reply—and such a reply! They told me I must have confidence in myself, in the goods I was selling, and in the firm.

I read that letter again and again. The next day I started for another town with the precious epistle in my pocket. The first house I ventured in I was getting along fairly well with my talk, and the lady, being a motherly old person, realizing my position, gave me an order. Before I struck the next house I pulled out the letter and read it.

TO MEET HIS EXCELLENCY

Continued from page 7

a touch the mine they had placed under the platform. When they had quite finished Chunder Sen had given the delayed orders for the patrolling of the line.

In the next toolshed was Govind Vinayak, peering through a crack in the boards of the door, seeing MacManus himself now and again; yet unable to communicate with anybody. There was practically no ventilation in his prison, and Chunder Sen had thoughtfully omitted to provide him with water or food.

It wanted but half an hour to the time when his Excellency's train was due. The laborers were lined up along the approaches, their foreman in front. The sun was shining, and the little station, with its streaming flags and gay red cloth, was gradually filling with guests, a score of them. MacManus was talking to the doctor's wife at the end of the platform nearest the signal box when he first became aware of a continuous and irritating sound of heavy blows striking upon metal. A moment later he guessed that the prisoner in the hut had found some tool in there, and was determined not to let his presence pass unnoticed. Chunder Sen was on guard at the door; but in vain did he command, threaten, or persuade: the blows never ceased. MacManus shrugged his shoulders and supposed that human endurance had its limits, and that the old man could scarcely maintain such violent effort for another thirty minutes. It was to be hoped that he would exhaust himself, since otherwise explanations might have to be offered.

It was seventeen minutes to the hour, and now the padre was telling MacManus that it was an auspicious occasion. Through the even flow of small talk words and half-formed words for which he could not account began to drift into MacManus's brain—rhythmically, continuously, repeated over and over again.

Platform platform under the platform platform platform

Just for one ghastly instant he thought that his brain was going wrong. Then, abruptly leaving the puzzled padre, he walked away. And all the while the prisoner in the toolhut was swinging a bar against its iron walls with all the force he could bring to bear upon the task. Crash—a pause—two rapid knocks—then crash again.

MacManus walked down the line at his usual pace; though his heart was beating like a drum, and there were beads of cold sweat breaking out on his temples. For he read the message that was being hammered out upon the walls of the hut only too well now—and somehow he knew, without reasoning or deduction, that Govind Vinayak, who had taught him the Morse code a lifetime away in North Kanara, was in there, tirelessly, desperately, sending out his thunderous warnings to save the man who had long been the child that he loved.

Mine under platform mine under platform

The train had passed the Undur station. In eleven minutes it was due at Amrakutch. MacManus stopped at the signal box, and gave an order. The distance signal dropped to "Danger," and the line was blocked. Before he had traversed the few intervening yards to the hut he knew all, or nearly all.

CHUNDER SEN saw the signal fall, and simultaneously the approach of his chief. His face drew into a distorted grin; but his eyes were windows to the naked terror of his soul. He wavered, tried to keep his stand, wavered again—and fled: not in haste, not as one in fear of pursuit. His chance lay in the urgency of the hour, and of the situation. He knew what MacManus had to do, and how quietly he would do it. So he walked away up the line, looking neither to the left—nor to the right, where his confederates waited in ignorance of the coming of their fate. No one noticed him as he walked out of sight. No one knew that he left the line and made across coun-

The sentence, "You must have confidence in yourself and the goods you are selling," appealed to me. I ventured and won. Several times more the letter was read, and after that I could have tackled anything or anybody. It was the making of me as a salesman.

The first week I ran about twenty-five dollars, the second week fifty, the third seventy-five, and later a hundred, and so on. The firm wrote and complimented me on my good work; but I was frank with them and gave them the credit, for it was the letter that did the business just as I was wavering.

try to strike the jungle. He was dropping into the native underworld of beggary, squalor, nothingness. And MacManus let him go.

Mine under the platform wires underground

MacManus tapped on the corrugated iron, "Repeat!"

Instantly the outrageous clanging ceased, the heavy tool fell to the ground. The message was reeled off in soft, distinct rappings, and the whereabouts of the two conspirators revealed. There was an addition, "I am thy servant, and thy father's servant, Govind Vinayak."

MacManus tapped "Accepted," and turned sharply to go. Then with a Heaven-sent impulse he stopped at the door, and put his lips to a crevice in the boards of it.

"Rest now, till I come again," he said.

NOW that the direct clue had been given, it was easy to trace the line of the wires, all the way to the platform, by the lighter-colored fragments of subsoil that had mingled with the darker earth when it had been replaced and stamped down. There was no loose earth left about to attract attention. Most of the smoothing had been done by naked feet; but here and there were the crisscross markings of galoshes—Wellington galoshes, perhaps.

There was a cart standing near the marquee. Sudden sharp orders were issued to move it out of sight, and a dozen men rushed to obey. MacManus helped, and somehow the cart was up on the track of the wires. The crowd of pushing, shouting coolies grew denser and more excited. MacManus, in the rear, hidden alike from the watchers in the hut and the guests on the platform, probed the rain-soft earth with long scissors snatched from the office in passing, found the wires, and cut them.

The cart was righted, and run behind some sheds. MacManus returned to the platform. He took Mackarness of the police aside, and whispered a word or two in his ear that made him whistle under his breath, and retire precipitately to seek out his inspector. The signal fell just as the oncoming train slackened speed.

At the appointed hour the Governor and his staff were on the platform, his Excellency murmuring his first expressions of congratulation and admiration.

Simultaneously the police inspector was introducing himself to the conspirators, having taken the precaution to post a couple of his men outside the hut. Ram Chundra instantly pressed the key that was to have worked havoc over at the station. In the pleasant calm that succeeded he and his fellow suddenly submitted to be handcuffed. They said a great many picturesque and unjust things about Chunder Sen; but at the time they did not know exactly what had happened.

MacManus entertained the Governor as a great man should be entertained, and when, after the usual honors, they drank his health, he made an excellently brief speech. When the train with its distinguished freight had resumed its journey, and the unsuspecting guests had dispersed, he hurried to the iron hut, and smashed the padlock off with a block of stone. Govind was not there!

LYING on the earthen floor, with torn hands and bruised limbs, was the frail husk of him, cast off by much suffering. MacManus looked and looked, and he saw all that there was to see. His face was white and fierce, and his hands gripped upon themselves until the straining muscles showed through the skin.

The station dined without its guest of honor that night; for MacManus sat alone in his dark and silent bungalow. To a messenger, breathless with haste, his servant made oath that he dared not approach his master.

"Behold! the Sahib sorrows as one who hath lost a man of his own blood!"

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